The Heraldic Emblem of Ireland.

By The O'Neill, Lisbon.

SOME time ago the *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries*, published a very interesting article by the rev. canon Ffrench, M.R.I.A., under the heading of "The arms of Ireland and Celtic tribal heraldry," in which the writer seems to wish to conclude—1st, that old Irish heraldry never attained a shape sufficiently definite to justify its comparison with other nations; and 2nd, that, everything considered, Ireland never possessed in former times an allegorical design in the shape of a standard or escutcheon that might be considered its national emblem. Without wishing in any way to contradict fundamentally the arguments presented by canon Ffrench, I beg to be allowed to say something, with the view of throwing some more light on the subject and indicating a solution.

In the first place, I must say I cannot agree with the assertion "that the coat of arms (in Ireland), before the reign of Hugh O'Neill, were the armorial bearings of tribes and territories, not of families. One example would suffice to prove that the use of coats of arms was known far beyond that period—the celebrated silver signet of Hugh O'Neill, king of Ulster,

SEAL OF HUGH O'NEILL, KING OF ULSTER.

circa. 1590. This beautiful specimen of old Irish heraldic art not only displays, in a highly artistic form, the arms of the house of O'Neill in silver workmanship, but contains also the proof of their individual application in

the following legend:—"*Sigillum Odonis O'Niall, regis triber nicorum Ultoniæ.*" Many other proofs of individual and family coat of arms might be adduced, referring to periods of great antiquity, and I believe few nations can boast of a more ancient legislation on heraldic subjects than the one established by the celebrated Irish king Ollamh Fodhla. The reverend canon, himself quoting Keating's history, says that "in a great triennial assembly at Tara, it was ordained by law that every nobleman and great officer should, by the learned heralds, have a particular coat of arms assigned to him according to his merit and his quality, whereby he should be distinguished from others of the same rank, and be known wherever he appeared." This extract clearly implies that there was a science of heraldry (the learned heralds), and, moreover, a full and highly respected legislation bearing on the subject.

Now, let us consider the question of what ought to be Ireland's national colours and banner. A banner, according to the rules of heraldry, is the reproduction of a coat of arms on a cloth, or sometimes formerly on a metal plate, so that it may be displayed with brilliancy on a field of battle or on the castle's beacon or banner. A banner must needs be the highest symbol of a family's or of a nation's traditions, of its glories, its heroism, its noblest aspirations, and as such it was and always has been venerated. In it is centralized all the highest feelings of a race. Again, what is the symbol or heraldic emblem that in Ireland has more completely realized these attributes? It is, undoubtedly, the "lambh dearg"—the right red hand. This noble badge has a history and a credit in Ireland in no way inferior to the prestige of any other heraldic sign of any other nation. Worn by several of the most powerful families of our country, it became the emblem of royalty under the O'Neill dynasty, as is seen in the signet above described. It was ever venerated by the people, followed by the armies, and gave origin to the celebrated war-cry of "lambh dearg Eireinn ahu!" the red hand of Ireland for ever; and I don't know of any country where an emblem of heraldry has more warmly and enthusiastically been allied to popular and patriotic feeling than this one. On the battlefield it was feared by the enemies who were awestruck when it appeared, as is referred to by the English writer Cox, who calls the red hand "that terrible cognizance." In fact, the prestige the "red hand" attained was so great that when the "plantation" of Ulster was decided upon the English government resolved upon introducing the emblem into the arms of the new baronets who were created by James for the cash which he desired to raise, so as to appeal more clearly to popular feeling, and adopted the left hand as a pretence for the new comers arms, so as to establish a certain confusion, and diminish, as it were, its distinction by rendering it common to all. The celebrity and fame of the "red right hand" badge in Ireland is, after all, quite natural, if we

remember that few national emblems, if any, have been for so many centuries attached more intimately to the life and the vicissitudes of a country as this one. History teaches us that already in pagan days it was adopted by the O'Neills from the Macgennis, who were princes in the north of Ireland in the region inhabited by them. The O'Neills were the dominant family in Ulster far more than a thousand years, and during this long period down to the 16th and 17th centuries, the "red right hand" was the dominant emblem, and in the festival of peace or in the ravages of war it was always foremost. Such was the fame of this family badge and its popularity in Ireland that other Irish dynastical families found it expedient to adopt it, with similar war cries, *i.e.*, the O'Briens—"lambh laidir an uachtar," the strong hand uppermost.

The origin of the right hand is lost in antiquity. It appears on several of the old high crosses of Ireland. It typifies the First Person of the Trinity —the right hand of God, and so appears from the earliest centuries. It is undoubtedly one of the oldest symbols of the world. The left hand is sometimes wrongfully represented in total ignorance of its symbolism.